A maze, a monster

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A maze, a monster

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Summary

There were fifteen sacrifices every year. Fifteen chosen by their villages or by the soldiers who came to collect them, fifteen sent into the maze to appease the beast inside.

Notes

June 10 - | Starvation | Shackle |

I think this is the longest finished thing I've ever written!

See the end of the work for more notes

Dust floated through the air.

He watched it, entranced. He'd watched dust dance as an infant, reaching chubby fingers out to touch it, not understanding that he would never be able to feel it against his skin. His father had liked telling that story, a foreshadowing of his gifts. Will had seen things no one else could since he was small, from dust mites to people's secrets.

Now, he watched the dust glow in the thin bars of light that made it through the slats of the wooden prisoner carriage.

Chains linked him to half a dozen others, all on the cusp of adulthood, dusty from traveling. They were the sacrifices, chosen by lottery or vote or by volunteering themselves. He had been voted on by his village, the odd Graham boy who saw too much and never quite connected to the other children. An easy choice, all things considered.

He was the second to last of the chosen. The last, a large, strong boy, was taken by the soldiers when he would not go peacefully. He was thrown among them, bruised and seething and as chained and powerless as everyone else. He told them all his name was Tobias, and he would survive this. The red headed girl laughed in his face.

In the weeks of travel, they talked of meaningless nothings, tiny comforts. Their names, Alana and Freddie were the two girls, Tobias and a thin, almost sickly boy named Eldon. None of them had siblings, or very many close friends. None of them had chosen to be here, which meant that they had been chosen, by dumb luck or by a consensus of everyone they knew deciding that this child was one they could afford to lose. Alana was the kindest, offering words of encouragement to the others, although they largely ignored her. Will knew her vaguely, from the large autumn festivals that brought together several of the nearby villages.

The towns were picked at random by the crown every year, with the promise that, once picked, they would not be called on again for at least five years. For the two of them to be chosen so close together was an unfortunate coincidence. The others were, according to their conversations, from farther away. They wouldn't be the only ones, every country that paid tribute to the King would offer sacrifices, but they were unlikely to see them until they arrived.

They went from dusty carriage to a massive sailing ship to another dusty carriage, and then they arrived and were placed in the prisons for safekeeping.

There were a dozen other youths there already, a mix of ages and races and genders. All young, though, and all considered disposable.

They were fed well, cleaned and cared for. This section of the prison was different from the rest, unless all prisoners were afforded soft beds and tapestried walls. The food they were given was the sort one could eat by hand, no knives were allowed. The rooms were the same, nails secured and pins taken from the girls hair. The others whispered stories of past tributes who had tried to take their own lives, deprive the thing in the maze of a meal. Any death in

this place, now, would force the king to find a replacement from within his own city. He worked very hard to make sure none of them would die before their time.

Three of the boys, taller and broader than Will, discussed strategy. How to find a way out of the maze, how to trick or kill the beast, how to make it out alive. They did not include Will in their plans, and he did not care to include himself.

The two girls Will had traveled with also talked about ways to survive, but not together. They both lied, and knew the other was lying. Freddie tried to ingratiate herself with everyone there, wearing a different personality each time, trying to convince them to work with her to escape the maze, or the dungeon. Alana was quieter. She'd been acting strange, disappearing for lengths of time, an impressive feat in a set of rooms so small. For most of the week, she'd appear only at mealtimes, when the guards checked on them. She was hiding something, and Will suspected that if anyone survived, she would.

Will watched the others, staying apart. They were not threats, or weren't supposed to be, but some of them, Tobias included, were dangerous. He had the look of someone who had hurt people before and enjoyed it. A chubby boy, slightly older than the rest of them, nearing twenty, had clung to Tobias since they first arrived. He saw Tobias as a lifeline, and Will couldn't help wondering if he'd be keen enough to see his lifeline wrap itself into a noose before he was hanging from it. Will doubted it.

Finally, after another week, the ceremony was ready to begin. They were dressed in matching white, shackled together, arranged loosely by height. All of them were led out of the dungeons and up long, winding stairs onto a brilliant stage. The noon sun burned Will's eyes, making it difficult to see the massive crowd stretching out before them, filling the courtyard and spilling out beyond. There was a man to their left, dressed in white robes, who was talking, explaining history and the reasons for them to be on that stage.

Will had grown up on the tale, knew every version by heart.

There was a king, not the king that ruled now, but an older king, his father, or grandfather maybe. This king was cursed by a god, or else his wife was seduced by one. They had a child with the head and hooves of a bull, or the great arching antlers of a deer, or the deadly claws and teeth of a wolf, or some other terrifying variation told to frighten children who stayed up past their bedtime. The child was hideous, and dangerous, and would grow more dangerous as it aged, so the king ordered a maze built, one strong and winding enough to contain the thing forever. A great builder crafted that maze, an endless moving thing, and the thing was placed inside, and even now it roams those twisting paths.

But the thing needs to eat, or it would grow even more hideous, or perhaps it would, devoid of prey, find it can follow a scent caught at birth back to the castle, killing those within, or maybe, in desperation, it will tear down Daedalus's walls and unleash itself on the city.

To protect, then, a tribute was born. Fifteen every year, gathered from every corner of the world that paid respect to the king's land. Given food and weapons and sent into the maze. If they were lucky and godsblessed, they would slay the beast and emerge with the right to marry the princess of the kingdom, or at least be given some great amount of land and money.

If they were not, and were as unlucky as the hundred before them, they would die in the maze, to starvation or each other or the monster that stalked it.

The robed man finished talking, and the crowd began tossing flowers at them. They landed on the stage, petals wilted in the hot sun. Red and yellow and pink and blue. Will stared at them. Were they a farewell? They would have no gravestones at which to pay respects, were these a recompense for that? Or were they meant to be joyful, out of some belief that this year, this time, the monster would be killed, and one or more of them would leave the maze alive? The flower closest to him had been crushed in someone's hand, the petals a dark and bruised red. It looked almost like blood.

The metal locked around his wrists was heavy, bruising. They were in a building, so heavily fortified it seemed almost alive to Will, a thick shelled beast curled on its haunches, guarding a soft underbelly. There were racks of weapons before them, gleaming blades and short bows and farming tools and wooden clubs. Tobias chose first, forcing those linked closest to him to move as well as he reached for a coiled metal wire. A massive, hulking boy chose a sword nearly as long as Will's arm, and then everyone was grabbing whatever weapon was in reach. He saw Alana choose a short, thin sword, and Freddie choose a pair of knives. He grabbed a bow. He was familiar with them, having hunted with his father, even if he preferred fishing, and it would afford him some distance from the thing.

Then they were being led to another room, bare except for a single, small door on the far wall, and they were unshackled. Nervous energy suffused the room. One of the girls, a tiny thing, was already crying, pressing herself into a corner. Will looked at Alana, and caught a glimpse of her tucking something into her pocket. It was glowing faintly and looked almost like a ball of yarn. A gift, maybe, from whoever she'd been disappearing to meet this whole time. He sincerely hoped it would work for her. She was brilliant, and kind, and deserved to survive.

The door yawned open on its own, revealing a rough stone passageway, some ten feet wide, the walls reaching up past where they could see through the doorway. They all stared at the door in silence for a moment, caught in some form of indecision. Then that pack of boys was moving towards the door resolutely, walking forward into the maze and disappearing around a corner. It broke the hush, the feeling of immobility. Others trailed out after them, whether brave or scared or desperate or just resigned. The small girl left quickly, murmuring to herself. She turned the opposite way of that pack of boys.

Soon, it was just Will and Alana, watching each other.

"Who's the yarn from?" Will asked. Alana flinched slightly, betraying herself.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Will gestured vaguely at her pocket. "I won't tell. Didn't tell when I could have. Just- I know you, a little." It was a terrible reason for her to trust him, he knew that. It didn't even matter, really, if she was getting help from someone. It wouldn't save his life. Still.

Alana hesitated, then pulled the ball of yarn out of her pocket. It was a blue white, glowing so faintly as to be nearly unnoticeable. It was beautiful.

“It’s enchanted. It’ll always be long enough to show me the way back, and it can’t be broken by the movements of the maze. And-,” Alana winced slightly, looking at Will with regret, “it only works for whoever is holding the ball of yarn, for you, it would end at a random wall, or lead in circles.”

Will smiled at her, awkward and accepting. He wasn’t getting out, and Alana had a real chance of making it. He offered a mock elbow, asking, “do you feel like walking together for a bit? Not for the whole thing- just, to start with.”

Alana smiled, soft and sweet, and they entered the maze.

The door swung shut behind them with a soft thud, trapping the end of Alana’s yarn under it. She gave it an experimental tug, and it remained in place, so they began walking. As they did, Alana began to get slightly flustered, clearly trying to work out how to best say something.

“The princess gave me the yarn,” she blurted, face slightly red.

Will glanced at her in surprise. So that was who she’d been meeting.

“Tell me about her?” He offered, and Alana relaxed, looking relieved. She didn’t seem the type to like keeping secrets, especially from those she cared about.

They passed much of the next few hours with Alana talking about the princess, Margot. Apparently, she was beautiful and kind and funny, and had offered to teach Alana how to ride a horse when she escaped the maze. They were going to run away together, but Margot couldn’t sneak her out before the maze, her brother keeping her on too tight a leash. After, though, Alana would be able to take Margot and disappear, and they could be together. It sounded like something out of a fairytale.

When the sun set on them, they curled together in an L-shaped dead end, hidden from anyone walking in the long passageway, and slept.

There were stories of wells and fountains in the maze, filled with things from poison to water to a liquid that would make you live forever, to Lethe water that would make you forget yourself completely. Tomorrow, they would have to search for one, and hope it contained something they could drink.

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Alana was gone when Will woke up. He wasn’t sure if it was the movements of the maze, or if she had just quietly left him in the middle of the night. It didn’t really matter either way. He was alone now.

Her yarn was gone, and with it, and marking of which passageway they’d come from. He’d fallen asleep in the only turn off on a long stretch of straight hallway, and woken to find himself at a crossroads. Will chose to walk forwards, then chose directions at random. He could feel himself moving deeper into the maze, a sort of weight that settled on him the longer he walked.

His legs grew tired, this throat sore. The last meal they had been fed was just before the ceremony, a day ago now.

Twice he heard hints of the others. Yelling once, although he couldn't tell from how far away. The stone ate up any sound made in this place. A slow scrape of metal on stone, sounding like it came from just around the corner. Will made an effort to head away from where he had heard that one. Once, he saw yarn, glowing faintly, stretched between two dead ends.

Finally, the passageway opened up into a small courtyard, ringed by archways heading off in every direction. In the center, burbling and bright, was a fountain. Will could have wept at the sight. The water was clear and sparkling in the faint light that reached past the towering walls of the maze. He drank his fill, wishing he had something to keep it in.

He could stay there. Even without food, water could sustain him, and he hadn't heard any signs of others in hours now. But the pathways gaped like maws, eager to consume him, and he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. The maze felt nearly alive, this deep inside it, a thing that could watch and track and hunger. He wasn't eager to remain in this bright, open place, it felt too much like the bright center of a fly eating plant. So he would keep going.

He chose the least predatory archway, aware of how ridiculous that particular thought seemed, and continued on. The pathway back closed behind with barely a sound, hiding the fountain from sight.

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It was colder that night, a chilled wind blowing through the endless halls. Far above his head, he could make out the stars. This far from home, they looked different, and it took him a moment to place the northern star. He knew how to navigate by them, he realized. If he followed the stars, he could orient himself in the maze, and find an edge, if not an exit.

Standing back up hurt, his abused muscles protesting at the movement, but he could sleep once the sun rose. Staggering to his feet, he kept his eyes raised skyward as he walked, angling towards the star.

He passed two days like that, sleeping through the day and walking through the night. He didn't find another fountain, or any sort of food. By the end of those two days, he was exhausted, and starving. His stomach had stopped growling at him sometime yesterday, but now it just ached, deep and constant. His head pounded, although he wasn't sure if it was from dehydration or exhaustion. But that heavy feeling from before was gone, the sense of being watched lessened.

Whatever had been back there, with the fountain, had not followed him here. There was some comfort in that. Even if he would die soon, it would not be to the thing that watched.

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On the third day since the fountain, the fifth since they'd entered the maze, he found the pack of boys. They were in another of the courtyards, this one with only four routes. They'd

clearly set up a camp of sorts, surrounding another fountain. This one was smaller than Will's, and seemed, at least from a distance, normal.

He tried to head away from them, but every path he took curved back towards that courtyard.

In frustration, he even tried climbing one of the walls. He barely made it ten feet up before the rough stone smoothed to something like marvel, and he had no choice but to slip back to the ground. The path still curved towards the courtyard.

In stubborn defiance, Will sat down in the curve of the corridor, out of sight of the courtyard. He stayed there for what felt like hours, listening to the other boys. Dust from the walls floated in the air around him, disturbed from his failed climb.

They were tracking the monster. They had lost a boy since entering the maze, the chubby one that worshiped them, although to what, Will didn't know. Tobias was still there, sounding an awful lot like their leader. They planned to kill the thing, working together to weaken it until one of them could strike a killing blow.

Did the maze want him to join them, add his bow to their weaponry? Or was he to be a final meal for them, to strengthen them before a battle?

He didn't want either, so he waited, and listened. Soon, there were footsteps from the other end of the corridor.

Stepping into view as if out of a doorway, from a passageway that Will would have sworn wasn't there a moment ago, was Alana. She looked… good. Far better than Will felt. She'd clearly found something to eat, at least.

She froze when she saw him, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Quietly, Will raised a finger to his lips, gesturing for silence, and waved her to him. She crept to him, one hand in the pocket that trailed yarn. She tensed, and Will knew she'd heard the boys discussing their plans.

They were talking now about how to best lure the thing. They wanted something to draw it out, and were making plans on how to find another of the sacrifices. Will and Alana shared a glance, aware of the danger they were in.

"Every path leads back to them," Will breathed, eyes flicking towards the voices, then to Alana's yarn. Can you lead us out with that? He didn't ask. Either she would escape alone, or they would together. It… discomforted him that she was still here. Maybe she needed proof of the monster's death to be allowed to leave the maze. Maybe her yarn wasn't as magical as she'd been led to believe. He hoped, for her sake, it was the former.

He rubbed his jaw, feeling the patchy growth fighting its way onto his face. He'd never let it grow before, hating how rough it felt and how poorly it grew in.

Alana tried to leave. She had Will twist a piece of the tarn around his wrist before leaving down the path, holding her ball of yarn as she walked and returning from the opposite

direction almost immediately. She tried again, heading back the way she'd come, but that was heading towards the courtyard now, and they didn't want to be seen.

Huffing, she sat down beside Will again. They sat there in silence, watching the sun rise in the sky. Five, six days now, they'd spent exploring a cursed maze hundreds of miles from home, and here they were again, side by side. He hoped she'd find her princess. He hoped they'd survive. They fell asleep again, leaning against each other.

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Screaming woke him.

A girl's scream echoing off the rocks, nearby and terrified.

Alana.

He stumbled to his feet, leaning against the wall for balance as a wave of nausea and lightheadedness swept over him. Alana was gone again, the yarn fallen from his hand. She had tried to leave again, and been caught.

He swayed slightly as he moved towards the courtyard, weakened from lack of food or water. The name, Alana, a drumbeat in his head. She had a princess to get back to, she was the one with a chance of surviving. She couldn't die.

The courtyard looked different now, larger. The clean stone from before, the same color as the walls, had been replaced by a large mosaic of tiles in every shade of red and black he could imagine. There were pillars in this courtyard, holding up air. Alana was tied to one, screaming at Tobias as he stood over her.

Will saw red.

In a single motion, he pulled the bow from his shoulder, pulling back the string as he aimed an arrow at the center of Tobias's back. He must have made some sound as he did so, because Tobias turned slightly, the arrow embedding itself in his shoulder instead.

A roar split the air, and for a delirious moment, Will thought it came from Tobias, an expression of pain. But then a doorway opened to their left, and the monster stepped through, roaring again loud enough to shake the walls around them.

It was terrifying. The storyteller that passed through his village hadn't done it justice in any of his lurid stories.

Pitch black antlers arched above its head, wide enough to scrape the walls. Wide, furred shoulders on a massive frame, easily seven or eight feet tall. Its powerful legs ended in hooves, the same oily black as its antlers, and its long arms were clawed and glistening with what looked like blood. Its face was almost human, in the way of ruined, ancient statues.

Behind it, inconsequential in his smallness, lay one of the boys, bloodied and eviscerated, dead. Tobias paled, backing away from the thing. He raised a sword, one he must have stolen

off another boy, as he backed away. It gave Will enough of an opening to sprint towards Alana, sawing at the cloth binding her wrists with the edge of one of his arrows.

The cloth frayed and snapped, and Alana stood, shaking. The monster had seen them, and turned away from Tobias to approach. He'd dropped his garrote near Alana when he'd fled, and Will grabbed it.

The beast bared its teeth at them, causing Alana to whimper in fear. Will bared his teeth back.

He glanced back at Alana, giving her a rough shove.

"Run, I'll distract it." At her protesting face, he added, "you've got a princess to save, I got this."

Alana nodded, and started running towards one of the branching pathways off of this courtyard. It was far, though, and the monster had her scent.

He took off the other way, racing towards one of the pillars. As the monster followed him, he jumped at the pillar, bounding back at the beast with enough height that he could cling to the thing's shoulders, looping the cord stolen from Tobias around its neck.

It roared again, trying to reach behind it to grab at him, but he just pulled tighter, watching though the flashes of its horns as Alana disappeared into a passageway, following her yarn.

The wire cut into his hands as he pulled, wrapped around them as it was. The thing was slowing slightly, and Will was glad for it. The adrenaline coursing through him could only do so much to make for a complete lack of food in nearly a week, and he was fading fast.

He watched, in almost slow motion, as Tobias returned, still clutching his stolen sword. Numb, Will couldn't understand why he would come back, didn't understand the light reflecting off the arc of the blade until he'd buried it in the monster's leg.

He should have felt prideful. Triumphant over helping defeat a monster. Instead, he felt almost disgusted. How dare Tobias interfere? Any thought of Will killing the beast faded in seconds, replaced with a strange defensiveness towards the beast. It didn't deserve to be killed by a coward who would wait until another had done all of the work. Alana was safe, and Will was suddenly angry, angry enough that he loosened his grip on the wire, letting it fall from his hands.

He slid down the things back, eyes on Tobias. The monster looked between them, apparently seeing Will's open rage, and stepped back slightly, watching them both.

He had no weapon, the bow and garrote discarded, while Tobias still had his sword. He was starved, had been fighting the beast, while Tobias had watched from afar. This wasn't a fair fight.

Will took a staggered step towards Tobias, baring his teeth. He looked at him, and found himself disgusted at what he saw.

“You don’t even want the princess, or the land. You just want to kill something,” Will sneered. Violence and pain and twisted enjoyment were soaked through him, leaking out his pores. Through the simple nature of his gender, should he make it out of this maze, he would have more claim to the princess than Alana. He couldn’t be allowed to leave, then.

As if understanding Will somehow, the monster leapt forward, tearing into Tobias with a savage growl. It gutted him, tearing him open as he fell to the ground.

Will followed behind, watching. Tobias was still alive, gasping for air, shaking hands twitching with aborted, pained movements.

Will knelt beside him, and murmured, soft and sweet, “you were a monster Tobias, just not the biggest one.”

The beast watched Will watching Tobias, waiting almost patiently until Tobias gasped and shuddered and stilled, finally dead. He’d almost forgotten it in his rage.

He smiled at it, faint and tired. The adrenaline had faded, and he could feel every ache in his body. There was no point fighting it, now. He knew how long a person could survive without water, and knew he was reaching the end of that time. Maybe the beast would kill him quickly, show him some form of mercy. Maybe it would take its time, like it did Tobias.

He watched it, half slumped against the stone floor, too exhausted to move. The wound on its leg had stopped bleeding, but the fur was still indented slightly around its throat where Will had choked it.

The monster reached out clawed hands, and Will closed his eyes, expecting blades to enter his chest, but instead he was gently lifted into the air. The soft press of fur and feathers against his side was oddly comforting, as was the rocking motion of the things movements. The beast had a heart, literally, thumping steadily in its chest, and Will wasn’t sure why The realization surprised him so much. He drifted off on that thought, listening to the steady thump of its heart.

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He woke up in the dark. He blinked again, hoping his eyes would adjust, but remained pitch black. No stars above his head.

He was laying on something soft, it felt like an old fur, worn with time.

He was alive. Unless this was the afterlife, but no priest or storyteller had said anything about old furs and the faint smell of cooking meat. Asphodel, maybe, the cooking smell the far off fields of punishment. That seemed unlikely, though.

He tried to move, and winced at the pain that lanced up his body. Everything hurt, the painful burning of overworked muscles pushed past their limits. His throat felt better though, and his headache had lessened slightly. Someone had given him water.

He tried to recall anything past that courtyard, but he could remember nothing after the feeling of fur against him.

A voice rumbled from the dark, low and graveled.

“Awake?” It asked.

Will froze. It was not the voice of a human, too low and too loud. Which meant he was likely wherever the beast lived, and the beast was the thing taking to him from the dark. The beast was a thing that could talk.

He nodded, pushing himself to a sitting position with some difficulty. He’d already decided to allow the thing to eat him, it would be both rude and rather pointless to try to change his mind now.

“Hurt?” Will shook his head at that. His injuries were sore muscles, not open wounds, and he hesitated at what the thing would do if it decided he was injured. If there was a point he would be considered ‘too injured’. It could also clearly see him, since it was responding to nods or shakes of his head even in the dark.

“What is- name?”

“Will. What- do you have a name?” Will asked.

There was another rumble from the dark, this time much closer to his bed, and Will had to force himself not to flinch at the closeness of the sound.

“Hannibal.” It replied, sounding near enough to reach out and touch. Hannibal. It could talk, and had a name. Will… had no idea what to do with that knowledge. It lent a different light to Hannibal’s actions in the courtyard, his watching Will and Tobias. It hadn’t been the actions of a dumb animal waiting for a meal, but an intelligent thing watching them. Weighing them. Tobias had failed, and was killed. Did Will pass then, having been brought to wherever they were? Or was this more akin to a second round?

Whatever it was, he wanted to survive. He wanted to know, with a passion he’d tried most of his life to avoid, everything he could about the thing that had saved him, had been trapped in this place.

He offered it another smile, far more genuine than the last.

“Hello, Hannibal.”

End Notes

Alana escapes and rescues Margot, and then does NOT leave her on a random island somewhere to be rescued by whoever the equivalent of Dionysius is.

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